

# The Spy Camera and Détente

Sarah Anderson, Presidential Libraries

Relations with the Soviet Union during the administrations of Presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald R. Ford are collectively known as a period of “détente.” This period was characterized by a number of summit meetings and important agreements between the two nations. It is important to note that détente did not mean that the Soviet Union and the U.S. suddenly became allies; rather they did not actively seek conflict with one another.

During both the Nixon and Ford administrations Henry Kissinger, first as National Security Advisor and then as Secretary of State, met weekly with the Soviet ambassador. The frequent meetings were intended as a way to bypass the bureaucracy and create an avenue for the President to exercise more control. Although the decision to bypass standard procedures led to additional complications at times, this period marked a series of agreements between the two states.<sup>1</sup> When Vice President Gerald R. Ford assumed the Presidency in August of 1974, he reassured the Soviets both publicly and privately that he planned to continue many of Nixon’s policies, including various treaties and the policy of détente.<sup>2</sup>

In March of 1975, the Soviets filed a formal protest with Secretary Kissinger regarding a Nikon camera that fell from a foreign plane circling over the German Democratic Republic.<sup>3</sup>(Figure 1) The demarche illustrates the changing nature of the relationship between the Soviet Union and the U.S. As written on the bottom right corner, the memo was hand delivered by Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin to Kissinger. This delivery indicates this was a matter to be kept between Ambassador Dobrynin and Secretary Kissinger.

The tone in the memo was warning, but not hostile. The Soviet Union demands no explanation, no public investigation. Instead the Soviet Union allows the U.S. to handle the matter internally with no interference. The rather neutral phrase, “[t]he Soviet side expects that the US military authorities will take all necessary measures to rule out the repetition of such cases in the future” is used. This allows the U.S. to claim that they have appropriately rebuked those responsible, while making no references to specific individuals or punishments.

The Soviets also did not publicize their acquisition of the Nikon camera. This contrasts with the confrontation that took place 15 years prior when the Soviet Union shot down a U-2 spy plane over Soviet airspace and captured the pilot, Gary Powers. Two weeks after the U-2 incident, the Soviet Union, U.S., Great Britain, and France were scheduled to have a summit in Paris to discuss among other concerns Berlin and disarmament. Premier Khrushchev refused to continue the summit without an apology for the incident from US President Eisenhower. President Eisenhower declined to apologize, and Premier Khrushchev left the summit.

The incident could have easily derailed the numerous negotiations that were taking place in 1975, just as negotiations in 1960 were derailed with the capture of the

U2 spy plane. In 1975, the Soviet Union and the U.S. were in the second round of the Strategic Arms Limitations Treaty (SALT II), beginning negotiations on the Helsinki Accords, and laying the groundwork for a billion dollar purchase of grain and wheat during a drought in the Soviet Union.<sup>4</sup> In 1975, the Apollo-Soyuz Test Project launched, marking the first joint U.S.-U.S.S.R. space program. The decision to handle the Nikon camera privately highlights the importance of positive relations to both states.

---

<sup>1</sup> Kissinger did not consult with subject matter experts due to the highly secretive nature of the back channel talks. This kept the negotiations on general talking points, with Kissinger avoiding specific details. (Dobrynin, A. (2007). 122. Telegram From Ambassador Dobrynin to the Soviet Foreign Ministry. In E. C. Keefer, D. C. Geyer, & D. E. Selvage, *Soviet-American Relations: The Detente Years, 1969-1972* (pp. 293-296). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.)

<sup>2</sup> Meeting with Foreign Minister Gromyko, September 20, 1974 11:00 am, Kissinger-Scowcroft West Wing Office File: USSR-Gromyko File, Box 35, National Security Adviser. Kissinger-Scowcroft West Wing Office Files, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library and Museum.

<sup>3</sup> March 29, 1975, USSR-Dobrynin/Kissinger Exchanges-Items #46-#55, 3/1/75-4/10/75, Box 33, National Security Adviser. Kissinger -Scowcroft West Wing Office Files, National Archives and Records Administration.

<sup>4</sup> "Soviet Grain Production and Trade Prospects," Grain Sales to the Soviet Union, Box 5, Richard B. Cheney Files, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library and Museum.